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AUTHOR Stotsky, Sandra L.
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ABSTRACT

Dictation in the language arts class most often involves lists of isolated spelling words. However, in France and in other European countries, the dictation of literary passages is a common activity in the language arts class and appears to be of great interest and benefit to students. Among the values of such dictation are the following: students gain experience in writing more mature thoughts, vocabulary, and sentence structures than they are apt to produce on their own; students acquire a feeling for the language of literature; and students are taught punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary in an interesting context rather than in isolation. Dictation also allows students to experience the writing process in a relatively relaxed way, without most of the possible burdens of choice inherent in freer kinds of writing activities. Teachers should seriously consider incorporating literary dictation into the language arts class. (GW)

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DICTATING LITERATURE IN THE LANGUAGE ARTS CLASS

Sandra L. Stotsky

What is dictation in the language arts class? Most often it consists of a list of isolated spelling words. Sometimes students write down a group of sentences created by their teacher (or suggested in a textbook for the teacher to dictate) to give them practice in punctuating and capitalizing as well as spelling in context. Unfortunately, this kind of dictation seems rare. The few teachers I have found over the past few years using dictated passages comment enthusiastically about its results and its reception by their students (see also Schofer, 1977), even though the passages themselves may lack distinctive style and imaginative content. However, in France, and in other countries in Europe, writing down the dictation of whole passages is a common activity in the language arts class and may be of considerably more interest and benefit to the students. In this article, I shall suggest why.

Traditionally, French teachers have given their students frequent practice in writing down dictated passages. While I have found no research available in English evaluating the cumulative effects of this kind of practice, it might be worthwhile for us to think about the values of dictated passages that seem to motivate its use by French teachers week after week, year after year, from the elementary grades to the secondary level.

THE VALUES OF DICTATION

Probably the best description of the values of the traditional "dictée" can be found in How the French Boy Learns to Write, written

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in the early part of this century by Rollo Brown, an American educator who spent a year in France examining French pedagogical techniques. He was quite impressed with the amount and kind of dictation he found French schoolchildren writing. He deplored (at that time) the fact that American teachers had already discarded it as a method for teaching writing and language skills. The following excerpt indicates the values of dictation that were suggested to Brown.

> . . .[Dictation] is based on the conviction that a child can acquire skill before he develops the power of profound or sustained thought. He has much practice, then, in writing the thoughts of others while he is yet too young to write his own. . .
>
> French teachers usually dwell upon four or five specific values of dictation. It gives the pupil much practice in the handling of the sentence; it directs his attention to grammatical constructions; it helps him to learn to spell, to punctuate, and to capitalize; it enlarges his vocabulary and gives him practice in the use of words already known to him; and it fills his mind with good standards of speech. To these should be added one value that the thoughtful teacher must regard as greatest of all; namely, that dictation prevents the pupil from separating spoken language and writing. . . . (1915, pp. 57-58)

As Brown later pointed out, the traditional French dictation had a very significant feature. After the earliest classes, it was not a group of ordinary sentences; it was a short but complete and interesting paragraph taken from the work of an acknowledged master of French literary language - with ideas and words "just within the pupil's reach." The literary quality of the dictée may have provided one of its most profound values. Indeed, a Parisian-born friend, reminiscing one day about some of the dictées she had written many years ago as a schoolgirl, remarked to me, "Above all, they gave me a feeling for the flavor of French literary language and an acquaintance with the writing style of every major author in French literary history."

A common procedure was used for giving dictation. First the teacher would read the entire passage orally to make sure the students understood it. Any difficult vocabulary was discussed in advance. Then the entire passage was dictated slowly, sentence by sentence, with pauses between syntactic groups. Punctuation marks were also dictated to the students. The passage was then dictated a third time for the student to proofread his paper. Corrections were always made immediately. According to Brown, students might read orally what they had written, with one student spelling out the difficult words to the others. The dictation would then serve as the basis for the week's lessons in spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation.

Although recent information from French educational sources indicates that modifications in content and in the way dictation is used at different grade levels are now being suggested or implemented in the wake of a series of reforms in the language arts curriculum,[1] the traditional values of the dictée have been retained. The following dictée, from the notebook of a third grade child in a French public school in 1965, may illustrate some of the points brought out in the excerpt from Brown.[2]

> Un brouillard opaque baigne la vallée; il cache la rivière; les arbres demeurent invisibles; les contours des maisons s'estompent. Nous n'aimons pas le brouillard.

The passage can be translated literally as follows:

> An opaque fog bathes the valley; it hides the river; the trees remain invisible; the contours of the houses are blurred. We don't like the fog.

This dictée is similar to the others in her notebook. It is short but contains some fairly difficult vocabulary; "opaque," "invisibles," "contours," and "s'estompent" - a rather literate French verb. The child is clearly writing well-written discourse and is being taught punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary in an interesting context, not in isolation.

DICTATION AS A WRITING ACTIVITY

We should also consider the writing down of dictated passages from another perspective. What kind of a writing experience is it and what kind of demands does this kind of writing make on the child? It is obvious that dictation is more demanding than mere copying in that it requires very active listening on the part of the child. However, the writing task itself is as highly structured. Students have only to reproduce exactly the language they are listening to; they do not have to work out their own vocabulary or sentence structure. Dictation allows students to experience the writing process without most of the possible burdens of choice inherent in freer kinds of writing activities. It is also one of the three types of paragraph writing highly recommended by McKee (1939, p. 235) for a program in composition. Thus, when literary passages have been carefully selected for content and length, dictation can provide a relatively more relaxing writing experience for students than most other kinds of writing activities. At the same time it gives students experience in writing more mature thoughts, vocabulary, and sentence structures than they are apt to produce on their own.

I would recommend that we think seriously about incorporating the literary dictation into the language arts class. It would not be difficult to select interesting and appropriate passages for all ability groups from the abundance of good literature available in most classrooms or

school libraries. Teachers may wish to experiment with passages of varying length and content in order to work out a sequence of passages suitable for different grade levels and for different groups of students within the same grade level. In general, the passages should be close to the students' reading level. One might also wish to follow the procedures for giving dictation suggested by Schofer, or in the teacher's edition of Language for Daily Use (Dawson et al., 1973, pp.8-9).

With judicious selection, literary dictation may be useful not only for teaching spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar in context, but also for helping students acquire a greater "feel" for the language of literature. As Applegate (1963) wrote, "good literature should be the sourcebook of sentence study rather than a textbook, literature that the children know and respect "(p. 132). Literary dictations might easily help serve this purpose.

FOOTNOTES

[1]The information comes from excerpts from several sources sent to me in 1975 by R. Poignant of the Centre Regional de Recherche et de Documentation Pedagogique in Amiens, France. The excerpts suggest that there is now much more emphasis on preparation for the dictée, either in class under the teacher's direction or as homework. If the dictée is to focus more on vocabulary acquisition, the teacher would discuss and write on the board the more complex syntactic aspects of the dictée in order to reduce difficulties with these features - or vice versa. Criticism has apparently been leveled against the dictée on the grounds that, for many students, the traditionally-used passages often contained too many infrequent words, difficult expressions, or complex syntactic constructions, or were often too long or outdated in terms of content. Much of this criticism should probably be viewed against a background of whole-class instruction typical of traditional French education. In general, current recommendations seem to emphasize greater flexibility, more preparation, and more specific focus in using the dictée.

[2]I am grateful to Lydia Cristofides, teacher in the Seattle, Washington public schools, for sharing her daughter's French notebook with me.

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